

Questions and Answers

March 2003

Conservation Security Program

Q. What is the Conservation Security Program (CSP)?

- A. CSP is a voluntary program that will provide payments for producers who have historically practiced good stewardship on their agricultural lands and incentives for those who want to do more. CSP will help producers of working lands promote conservation and improve the quality of soil, water, air, energy, and plant and animal life. It will provide environmental benefits by addressing resource concerns on agricultural working land.

Q. What is the role of CSP?

- A. In keeping with the principles outlined in the USDA publication, "Food and Agriculture Policy – Taking Stock for the New Century," the Secretary has established a vision for the CSP's unique role. CSP will identify and meaningfully reward those farmers and ranchers who are meeting the very highest standards of conservation and environmental management on their operations and create powerful incentives for others to do the same, while providing public benefits for generations to come.

Q. How are you going to put this program together?

- A. The Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (Farm Bill), although specific in some areas, left many details to be defined. We are going to reach out as broadly as possible to solicit views from as wide a range of interests as possible as we move forward. Our first step in this process

is the recent publication of an Advanced Notice of Proposed Rulemaking.

Q. What is an Advanced Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (ANPR)?

- A. The ANPR is a method of soliciting public comments on some of the most important issues that must be resolved before we can proceed with a proposed rule. Comments received from the ANPR will help us determine the best alternatives for implementation strategies and processes to achieve the intended purpose of the program.

Q. When will the CSP be available?

- A. The Conservation Security Program is going through the formal rulemaking process. This process will include a significant period of public comment. We will make the rulemaking process fully collaborative. There are a number of significant issues that will need resolution. The program will be available after publication of the final rule.

Q. How does CSP fit in with the other conservation provisions?

- A. CSP will be complementary to other USDA conservation programs. Where other programs help with installation or initial establishment of conservation management practices, CSP will provide a payment for those who have attained a level of conservation achievement that goes above and beyond minimum resource requirements for non-degradation.

Q. What is the relationship between CSP and Farm Bill commodity programs?

- A. Participation in CSP does not require participation in commodity farm programs. However, there is a requirement of compliance with highly erodible land and wetland provisions (HEL, sodbuster, and swampbuster) of the Food Security Act of 1985.

Q. What is the relationship of CSP payments to the farm program payment limitation?

- A. None. As with any conservation program payment, commodity payment limitations are not affected by receiving payments under CSP.

Q. What is a resource concern?

- A. Resource concerns are the conditions of the natural resources that may be sensitive to change by natural forces and human activity. Concerns are identified by predictive models, direct measurements, observation, or client objectives. Examples of resource concerns are water quantity, water quality, soil erosion, soil quality, air quality, animal management, and plant suitability.

Q. What are quality criteria?

- A. Quality criteria establish the minimum treatment level necessary to adequately address identified resource concerns for a particular land area. These criteria are established in the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Field Office Technical Guide.

Q. What land is eligible for CSP?

- A. Private agricultural land, including cropland, grassland, prairie land, improved pasture land, and rangeland; land under the jurisdiction of an Indian Tribe; and forested land that is an incidental part of

the agricultural operation are eligible for enrollment in CSP. Land enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Wetlands Reserve Program, or Grassland Reserve Program is not eligible. Land converted to cropland after 2002 also is not eligible, unless it had been planted or considered planted in four of the years between 1997 and 2002; had been maintained as part of a long term crop rotation, as determined by USDA; or had been (but no longer is) enrolled in CRP.

Q. Is CSP targeted to specific producers or available to anyone?

- A. The CSP is available to all agricultural producers, including Tribes. CSP is available to all farm and ranch types and sizes in all regions of the country.

Q. Could the Adjusted Gross Income provision of the 2002 Farm Bill impact my participation in CSP?

- A. Yes, if you are an individual or entity that has an average adjusted gross income exceeding \$2.5 million for the three tax years immediately preceding the application year, you are not eligible to receive program benefits or payments. However, an exemption is provided in cases where 75 percent of the adjusted gross income is derived from farming, ranching, or forestry operations. The final rule for this provision has not yet been published.

Q. How are the payments determined?

- A. Payments may include a base payment determined by the treatment level, management and maintenance payments for conservation practices, and enhanced payments for treatment that exceeds the minimum requirements. There also are provisions in the statute for cost-sharing practices for those who want to increase their conservation treatment.

Q. How will the CSP program benefit the environment?

- A. The CSP will help owners and operators of agricultural lands maintain conservation stewardship and implement and maintain additional needed conservation practices. The conservation benefits gained will keep farms and ranches more sustainable and increase the benefits provided to all Americans through improved natural resources.

Q. Does conservation tillage or no-till automatically qualify a producer for participation?

- A. No. Although conservation tillage or no-till goes a long way toward treating a resource concern, it may not be enough by itself to solve erosion problems, and there may be other resource concerns on the agricultural operation that conservation tillage does not address.

Q. I am a Certified Organic Producer. Do I automatically qualify for participation?

- A. No. Although being a certified organic producer goes a long way toward treating some resource concerns, there may be other resource concerns on the agricultural operation that a certified organic plan may not address.

Q. Does my conservation compliance plan qualify for CSP?

- A. No. In fact, the practices or treatment required to meet minimum compliance criteria cannot receive cost-share for installation or maintenance. However, practices maintained under a conservation compliance plan do count toward satisfaction of the relevant quality criteria.

For More Information

If you need more information about CSP, please contact your local USDA Service Center, listed in the telephone book under U.S. Department of Agriculture, or your local conservation district. Information also is available on the World Wide Web at: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/farmbill/2002/>



Visit USDA on the Web at:
<http://www.usda.gov/farmbill>

Note: This is not intended to be a definitive interpretation of farm legislation. Rather, it is preliminary and may change as USDA develops implementing policies and procedures. Please check back for updates.